

## **Responsibility: A Hallmark of Professionalism, I**

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Joyful acceptance of responsibility is a hallmark of professionalism, particularly in the military. The idea, while timeless, has received less than its due attention in recent years. A result has been some tension within the ranks as juniors and seniors look at one another and feel that in some ways their expectations are not being met. Direct attention to the notion of responsibility will help remedy this problem.

A profession, as defined by Don Snider and Gayle Watkins in *The Future of the Army Profession*, includes a concrete body of expert knowledge that is developed and passed onto others who are, in turn, expected to apply it to unique situations. Although this definition of profession is new, the notion of responsibility as the underpinning is not. Ancient writers such as Plato, Xenophon, Sun-Tzu, and Caesar, to name just a few, highlighted the criticality of responsibility in their discussions of leadership. Carl von Clausewitz focused on acceptance of it as a central trait of successful commanders. Recovering the idea of the joyful acceptance of responsibility will strengthen the fabric of our military culture.

Joyful acceptance of responsibility includes a personal passion for excellence, mission focus, and the inculcation of professionalism in others. The first essay will focus on the most inclusive of the three: personal passion for excellence. The latter two will be the subjects of a following essay.

### **Personal passion for excellence**

Aristotle defined excellence as the combination of character and competence. That leaders must be trustworthy in these regards is non-negotiable. They must be morally and ethically beyond reproach and possess competence in the skills, knowledge, and abilities of their position. They must be able to articulate a coherent vision for the organization and plan to get there. They must balance the steadfastness to stick to decisions in the face of uncertainty and doubt with the open-mindedness to alter course when change is required. To be sure much of the above is more art than science, but professionals accept the responsibility to develop in themselves those capabilities. Here are some ways they do so.

Studying the profession constantly. Professionals master the doctrine and the tactics, techniques, and procedures of their craft and possess expert technical competence. They understand the art and science of war in theory and history and spend time reading the experiences and insights of their contemporaries in professional journals. They are conversant in the nuances of ethics and morality. They have a deep awareness of history and culture - their own and those of others - and apply them to the demands of the profession. They profit from their own mistakes and triumphs as well as those of others. They understand how to think through the ambiguity of complex situations and make decisions that stand the utmost scrutiny. They take every experience - in training, in reading, in sports, and in everyday life and draw professional insights from them. They strive for a balanced life and find professional satisfaction in so doing.

The Buck Stops Here. Professionals lead from the front. They accept responsibility for dealing with everything that happens and fails to happen in their organizations - in times of success that means rewarding their soldiers, sustaining excellence, and seeking further improvement; when events take a turn for the worse they focus on rectifying the situation and creating opportunities for the unit to learn and grow from the experience. They know that they cannot control everything that happens in their units, but they do control how they respond. No excuses and no attempts to blame others when things go awry. They do not tolerate evasion of responsibility.

Professionals know that the training, competence, morale, and well-being of their units is in their hands, not in the hands of some amorphous and nefarious "other." They are difference-makers, raising the level of performance of those around them.

Professionals are problem-solvers not just problem-identifiers. When they confront their boss with a problem they come armed with recommendations. In the absence of orders or when guidance is unclear they make decisions that are consistent with the right priorities and lead to combat readiness.

Relentless adherence to standards. Professionals understand that discipline is the two-fold process of education and enforcement. They are master communicators. They set standards and expectations that are meaningful, understandable, and relate directly to combat readiness. They realize that teaching is job 1, and that the better they teach the more likely that subordinates will internalize standards and not require constant monitoring. When expectations are not being met they look at themselves first to determine whether standards were clear. They never look the other way; they see problems as opportunities to educate rather than merely chastise. They create disciples of their subordinates who carry on the responsibilities of education and enforcement.

Professionals train relentlessly, ensuring that their units can perform their combat critical tasks expertly. They maximize their available time - retraining as necessary if expectations are not met or "bumping up the high-bar" to make the tasks more challenging when initial objectives are attained. They are masters of the after action review, understanding that that is where the learning and improvement actually begin. Their units emerge from a training event tired but confident and energized with a clear strategy to sustain excellence and improve weaknesses.

Doing what is right (Looking inside the numbers). Having a passion for excellence also means getting results the right way. Numbers and statistics, by themselves, are only paper-thin. Professionals know that statistics are not indicators of success or failure but measures of outcomes that, when analyzed thoroughly, can lead to improvement in the organization. The focus is not on the number itself but on the actions that result from analysis. Pencil-whipping statistics and meeting the letter but not the spirit of requirements is ultimately self-defeating. Doing things the right way and measuring accurately are the only ways to get fidelity in the process. Based on accurate inputs they can investigate whether a system is operating properly, if leaders and soldiers are trained and educated, if the right resources are available, and if policies and programs are aligned with combat readiness. Amateurs are obsessed with the numbers themselves; professionals center their attention inside the numbers. They seize on the opportunities to fix shortfalls and sustain what works well.

Seeking Improvement. Professionals take responsibility to improve themselves and their organizations. They are not satisfied with "that's the way we've always done it" and "if it ain't broke don't fix it." They seek to understand why the organization does things a certain way, they investigate if that policy, program, or system is the best way, and then change what is necessary to change and leave in place what should remain in place. They know that what has worked in the past does not have an infinite shelf-life. Conditions change and organizations need to adapt. The old dictum that militaries tend to fight the last war is only partially right. The real problem is that they either tend to draw the wrong lessons from experience and code them as dogma or they fail to adapt to a new environment. Sensitivity to what should change and what should not spell the difference between meaningful improvement and distracting hyperactivity.

Justice Clarence Thomas had it right when he said, "You can be a hero or a victim, you cannot be both." It is up to us to make the choice. Joyful acceptance of responsibility is the antithesis of victimology. Victims obsess about being wronged. Professionals focus on creating opportunities for excellence. That passion begins on the inside and works its way out toward the organization. It is realized in mission focus where it is put into practice in everyday life, and in the inculcation of excellence in others in which it serves as a legacy to improve the profession. Those will be the subjects of part II.